

Shifting the Terms of Debate: How Big Business Covered Up Global Warming

[Here's the first part of an article I wrote last year about how right-wing think tanks shift the debate.]

In 2004, Michelle Malkin, a conservative editorialist, published the book *In Defense of Internment*. It argued that declassified security intercepts showed that Japanese internment during World War II — the government policy that relocated thousands of Japanese to concentration camps — was actually justified in the name of national security. We needed to learn the truth, Malkin insisted, so that we could see how racial profiling was similarly justified to fight the “war on terror.”

Bainbridge Island was the center of the evacuations; to this day, residents still feel ashamed and teach students a special unit about the incident, entitled “Leaving Our Island”. But one parent in the district, Mary Dombrowski, was persuaded by Malkin’s book that the evacuation was actually justified and insisted the school was teaching a one-sided version of the internment story, “propaganda” that forced impressionable children into thinking that the concentration camps were a mistake.

The school’s principal defended the practice. As the *Seattle Times* reported:

“We do teach it as a mistake,” she said, noting that the U.S. government has admitted it was wrong. “As an educator, there are some things that we can say aren’t debatable anymore.” Slavery, for example. Or the internment — as opposed to a subject such as global warming, she said.[â€](#)

True, Japanese internment isn’t a controversial issue like global warming, but ten years ago, global warming wasn’t a controversial issue either. In 1995, the UN’s panel on international climate change released its consensus report, finding that global warming was a real and serious issue that had to be quickly confronted. The media covered the scientists’ research and the population agreed, leading President Clinton to say he would sign an international treaty to stop global warming.

Then came the backlash. The Global Climate Coalition (funded by over 40 major corporate groups like Amoco, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and General Motors) began spending millions of dollars each year to derail the Kyoto Protocol, the international treaty to help reduce global warming. They held conferences entitled “The Costs of Kyoto,” issued press releases and faxes dismissing the scientific evidence for global warming, and spent more than \$3 million on newspaper and television ads claiming Kyoto would mean a “50-cent-per-gallon gasoline tax.”[â€](#)

The media, in response to flurries of “blast faxes” (a technique in which a press release is simultaneously faxed to thousands of journalists) and accusations of left-wing bias, began backing off from the scientific evidence.[â€](#) A recent study found only 35% of newspaper stories on global warming accurately described the scientific consensus, with the majority implying that scientists who believed in global warming were just as common as global warming deniers (of which there were only a tiny handful, almost all of whom had received funding from energy companies or associated groups).[â€](#)

It all had an incredible effect on the public. In 1993, 88% of Americans thought global warming was a serious problem. By 1997, that number had fallen to 42%, with only 28% saying immediate action was necessary.¹ And so Clinton changed course and insisted that cutting emissions should be put off for 20 years.

US businesses seriously weakened the Kyoto Protocol, leading it to require only a 7% reduction in emissions (compared to the 20% requested by European nations) and then President Bush refused to sign on to even that.[â€](#) In four short years, big business had managed to turn nearly half the country around and halt the efforts to protect the planet.

And now, the principal on Bainbridge Island, like most people, thinks global warming is a hotly contested issue — the paradigmatic example of a hotly contested issue — even when the science is clear. (“There’s no better scientific consensus on this on any issue I know,” said the head of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “except maybe Newton’s second law of dynamics.”)² But all this debate about problems has kept us away from talk about solutions. As journalist Ross Gelbspan puts it, “By keeping the discussion focused on whether there is a problem in the first place, they have effectively silenced the debate over what to do about it.”[â€](#) So is it any wonder that conservatives want to do the same thing again? And again? And again?

Next: [Part 2: Making Noise](#)

CNN, *USA Today* poll (conducted by Gallup). “We’d like your impression of what scientists believe...?”, November 1997. In *Roper Center for Public Opinion Research* (0287624, 072). USGALLUP.97NV06, R31.

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Warrick, Joby. “Consensus Emerges Earth Is Warming — Now What?”, *Washington Post*, 12 Nov. 1997: A01. ■

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